

**LIFE LESSONS FROM THE LIONS:  
REFLECTIONS FROM AFRICA**

A Sermon Offered by Rev. Tim Kutzmark

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Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

“Since we humans have a brain, isn’t our responsibility  
to protect our fellow creatures from, oddly enough, ourselves?”

*Joy Adamson, naturalist, author of ‘Born Free’*

When the African Spitting Cobra stretched its head through the window and then slithered into the living room where we always ate dinner, I knew I wasn’t in Reading, Massachusetts, anymore!

I had headed to the South African bush because I wanted to experience something dramatically different. I wanted to walk on the wild side, to go someplace raw, a bit edgy. But, since this was my sabbatical, I also wanted to go to a place deeply imbedded in the original meaning of the word ‘religion.’ Religion, despite all its distortions, is a word that, at its root, simply means ‘to put back together again, to make something whole’. Albert Einstein once said: “A human being is part of the whole . . . [but] we experience ourselves . . . as something separated from the rest . . . This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us . . . Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures, and the whole of nature in its beauty.” My Unitarian Universalist faith challenges me, challenges us, to remember that we are inexorably interconnected with every living thing. The Seventh of our Unitarian Universalist principles by which we guide our lives says we must remember that we are part of a vast and interdependent web of life. We must not live for ourselves, alone, but with responsibility to the whole of creation. I guess I wanted to go someplace that would cause me to experience this in a new way, a place that would widen my circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures, and the whole of nature in its beauty.

And so I found myself at daybreak, riding with five other volunteers in the back of a bakkie (that’s what South Africans call a pickup truck). We were headed out to spend hours under the hot sun tracking a pride of lions in a vast wildlife reserve called Selati, in the northeastern edge the country. I was part of Limpopo Eco Operations Africa (or LEO Africa, for short). This small but impactful venture focuses on predator research, wildlife management and conservation. These are scientists, game rangers and wildlife preservationists working to protect embattled and endangered wildlife. Their goal: to create a self-sustaining and balanced blend between predator and prey. In a land decimated by unrestrained animal slaughter, LEO Africa is practicing true ‘religion’, trying to put something back together again, trying to create the conditions that will allow nature to become whole once more. These folks were amazing. There was Koos, the head of the project, late 30’s, a brusque, strapping, handsome, bald Afrikaner whose no nonsense approach was perfect for combatting poachers who were bent on destroying the

lions and rhinos in his care. There was Adam, a skinny 20-something from the U.K. who had taught school in Kenya and travelled throughout East Africa before coming to Selati, lured by the call of the wild. There was Tweedie, an openhearted, serious, solidly built former member of the Australian Navy who first came to LEO Africa as a volunteer and was now a staff person focusing on her passion for hyena research. There was Liz, also from “down under,” hard drinking and hard working, who once read a book about living with lions and now was doing just that! The volunteers who helped out were all youngsters, five sweet college-age kids from the U.K., Canada, Australia, and Switzerland. And there was me, another volunteer. To those kids, I was the old guy, from the U.S.

Being part of LEO Africa meant, in addition to spending more than eight hours a day bumping through the bush in the back of that bakkie searching for lions, I also slung a pick in road erosion projects and recorded precise GPS coordinates for each and every animal we encountered (from elephant to kudu to klipspringer to black-backed jackal). I even grabbed binoculars and searched the rocky hillsides and kopis for poachers. We lived in a rather run down little bunkhouse. We shared a bathroom that had never heard of Lysol or ever seen a sponge. We cooked our own food, including many meals of fresh killed impala (a type of antelope). At night, we sat under the stars and stared at the sparkling immensity above us. After shaking out our sleeping bags to make sure there were no snakes or scorpions inside, we fell asleep to the sound of a lion’s roar, the hyena’s howl, or the occasional cry of an antelope as it fell to a leopard’s leap.

Those amazing weeks out in the African bush provided ample opportunity for observation, contemplation and discovery—plenty of time to learn life lessons from the lions.

The first lesson I learned is a seemingly obvious one: *A living lion is more beautiful than a dead one.* Let me explain. The first time I saw a lion walking in the wild was one of the most spiritually rich and naturally transcendent moments I have ever known. It was my second night at Selati. We had been out late at a camera trap, hanging bait (a bloody hunk of impala leg) in the hope of catching a photograph of a hard-to-spot leopard. It was about 10:30 pm, the moon was low and full, we were tired, the warmth from our hot beverage break had long faded, the bukkie smelled of rotting meat and open animal intestines, and I was ready to call it a night. I shut my eyes for a moment when I heard a sharp intake of breathe from Adam, who was sitting in front of me. I opened my eyes. Walking slowly in front of the truck, in the headlights was Mica, a female, three-years-old. She was large, seemingly one moving muscle, with a broad head that was force-filled and soft all at the same time. Mere seconds later, she melted into the brush, and night rushed in to fill the empty space left behind. Then I turned my head. And there, in the darkness, was Selati, the mother, the great lioness of the pride, walking silently along the side of the truck, directly parallel, not three feet from me. I could have reached out my hand and touched her neck. She could have reached out her neck and pulled me to the ground. I felt terror and joy. I could not breathe. I could only bear witness to this creature so wild, so powerful and so completely confident in her presence in that moment, in that place. Her stride claimed the ground. Her muscular frame flowed and I wanted to

bow down before her, this tan, carnivorous goddess, this most awesome manifestation of life. And not once when we were so close, side-by-side, breathing the same air, did I ever think: “I want to shoot this lion. I want to mount her head on a piece of wood and hang it on my wall. I want to chop off her paws and dig out her claws to sell them on the black market.” In the face of such raw beauty, I find it unfathomable how and why anyone would want to fire a bullet into her heart and stop it forever. I can barely comprehend how someone could set a snare to entangle this lion’s mighty head, a wire snare that would tighten, slicing deeply into her neck and slowly strangling her as she struggled for hours to get free. Joy Harjo wrote in the poem we heard minutes ago:

Remember the moon; remember the dark.  
Remember the . . . animal life who all have their  
tribes, their families, their histories, too . . .  
They are alive . . .  
Remember you are this universe and this universe is you.  
Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.  
Remember. Remember.

Over the following weeks, as I observed more about them, the second life lesson from the lions unfolded. The second lesson is this: *We can survive on our own, but we only thrive when we are deeply connected to a community, a community that is working together for the betterment of all.* Lions are not solitary creatures. Their prides are their tribes, their families, and the repositories of their history. Lions hunt in synchronized unison, tracking their prey together over miles and miles. Lions instinctually know there is strength in numbers, that they are more effective together than apart. I saw this as I watched Mica, Selati and Mbhurri (the male of the pride) move through the night, flushing out prey. Only a team can bring down something as large as a wildebeest; hunger ends only through collaboration. Watching Mica, Selati and Mbhurri hunting, I remembered a reading we often share, here, in this sanctuary. It says:

We need one another . . . We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone. We need one another in the hour of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs. We need one another in the hour of defeat when with encouragement we might endure and stand again . . . All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.

Don’t we know that, deep in our soul? Don’t we feel a hunger for something more than our isolation provides? We are searching. We are hunting for something. We want to belong, to have a tribe. I think that’s why most of us are here today, in this church. There is an instinctual part in each of us that yearns to be deeply connected to a community, a community that is working together for the betterment of all. In South Africa, they call this “Ubuntu.” Ubuntu is a word that means: “I am because you are.” A lion might *survive* on her own, but she can only *thrive* when she is deeply connected to the pride. So, too, with us: “We need one another.” “I am because you are.” Ubuntu. In Ubuntu are the roots of “morality, humanness, compassion, caring, understanding, and

empathy.” (*An Elephant Bloodline*, Howard Flight, p. 67) South Africa Archbishop Desmond Tutu says; “A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good . . . [this] comes from knowing that she or he belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when [any part of that whole] is . . . diminished.”

Ubuntu is how and why the Selati Game Reserve was formed. Selati is massive. It takes hours and hours to drive from one end to the other. But this was not always the case. Not too long ago, the area now known as Selati was made up of a collection of individual farms, separated from one another by fences. The land that now lets elephants roam widely was once a series of small fiefdoms, each cut off and in competition with the other. Back then, they raised cattle, and didn’t do such a good job of it. But then the individual landowners realized that their small section of land could become part of something much greater. The separate parts could be brought together into a more useful and more productive whole. Collectively, they could unite themselves through environmental responsibility and by practicing earth ethics. And so the fences came down, and the cows were replaced with rare white rhino, cheetah, giraffe, black sable, and eventually, a pride of lions. Selati Game Reserve is supported, is funded, by individual wealth, limited eco-tourism, and the carefully coordinated culling of elderly animals. Animals that would soon die naturally are identified, and then responsible hunters pay huge amounts of money to track and kill them. There is an irony in Selati and in most South African wildlife preserves. A few older animals must die in order for the majority to survive. (This is something I really struggled with, as I came to understand the true meaning of “wildlife management.”) A few older animals are hunted in order to pay for the preservation of countless others. Ubuntu: “I am because you *were*.”

That leads to the final life lesson from the lions: *Death is an ever-present possibility, but it must not keep us from living.* The potential of death is pervasive in the African bush, from the African Spitting Cobra stretching itself through the window to the scorpion resting under the rock. Lions and leopards need to feed. A startled elephant can crush; an angry rhino can charge. A cornered poacher can kill. Out in the bush, we never stepped from the bukkie without a guide. We never left the small cleared circle around the bunkhouse without a gun. Death *was* an ever-present possibility, but it did not keep us from living. We were there because we wanted to walk on the wild side, to go someplace raw, a bit edgy. We wanted to widen our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. That couldn’t happen if we stayed completely safe, separate from the life that was there.

Unitarian Universalist minister Mark Morrison-Reed writes:

We are all dying, our lives always moving toward completion. We need to learn to live with death, and to understand that death is not the worst of all events. We need to fear not death, but . . . empty lives, loveless lives, lives that do not build upon the gifts that each of us have been given, lives that are like living deaths, lives which we never take the time to savor and appreciate, lives in which we never pause to breathe deeply. What we need

to fear is not death, but squandering the lives we have been miraculously given.

My Spiritual Friends: May the wisdom taught by the lions be with us this day. May we open our eyes to the strength and the beauty that is walking beside us. May we feel the instinctual truth that is Ubuntu: all our lives we are in need of others, and others are in need of us. May we widen our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures, and the whole of nature in its beauty. May we, though death is all around us, find a myriad of ways to claim life. And, when our last day comes, may we know peace, releasing ourselves into the soul of the whole.

May it be so. Blessed Be. Amen.

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